

## PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/100377>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2017-12-06 and may be subject to change.



# The Gospel of John's perception of ethical behaviour<sup>1</sup>

J.G. van der Watt  
Department of New Testament Exegesis  
Radboud University Nijmegen  
Unit for Reformed Theology  
Potchefstroom Campus  
North-West University<sup>2</sup>  
POTCHEFSTROOM  
E-mail: janvanderwatt@kpnmail.nl

## Abstract

### The Gospel of John's perception of ethical behaviour

*Johannine ethics have proven to be a problematic and challenging area of research. In this article the way in which the author of the Gospel of John defines ethical actions are explored. What does he describe as the works of God and what is really good, according to him? The conclusion is that the analytical categories for treating the ethics in the Gospel of John should be broadened.*

## Opsomming

### Die Evangelie volgens Johannes se opvatting oor etiese gedrag

*Johannese etiek is 'n problematiese en uitdagende ondersoekveld. In hierdie artikel word die manier waarop die outeur van Johannes etiese aksies definieer, ondersoek. Wat sien hy as die werke van God en wat is, volgens hom, werklik goed? Die konklusie is dat die analitiese kategorieë verbreed moet word waarvolgens etiek in die Evangelie van Johannes hanteer moet word.*

---

1 Ek dra hierdie artikel op aan Tjaart van der Walt in dankbare erkenning vir sy groot bydrae as Nuwe-Testamentikus.

2 Jan van der Watt is extraordinary professor at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University in Potchefstroom.

## **1. Questions about ethics in John – an apparent lack?**

Johannine ethics have proven to be a problematic and challenging area of research. Many scholars experience what they call a lack or absence of ethical material in the Gospel, which then explains the relative lack of treatment of this topic. As Matera (1996:92) contends:

For anyone interested in the study of New Testament ethics, the Gospel according to John is a major challenge ... there are remarkably few references to moral conduct ... and its most explicit ethical teaching raises a host of questions.

Theobald (2002:565) expresses similar sentiments by saying:

Ein *ethisches* Interesse an der Gestaltung der Lebensbereiche der Gemeinde wird im Buch nirgends greifbar. (Cf. also Wendland, 1975:109; Schrage, 1996:302.)

It is, therefore, not surprising that books on theology or ethics of the New Testament often do not give attention to the ethics of John. If they do, it is very superficially as is the case with the theology of Berger (1994:665-666; 1997), Hübner (1995), Dunn (2009), and others.<sup>3</sup> If attention is given to the ethics, it is often by way of paraphrasing the material or by focusing on one particular aspect, like love (Augenstein, 1993; Popkes, 2005), law (Loader, 2002) or sin (Metzner, 2000). More recently efforts have been made to approach the ethics from a broader methodological perspective, by using narratology (Burridge, 2007) or social-history (Meeks, 1986a; 1986b; 1993; 1996).

In this article the author would like to start with a simple question in trying to get to the essence of John's ethical thinking: does the text of John (= author) give us any indication of what he himself would call moral behaviour? An answer to this question would help us to determine how we should approach the "ethics of John" in general. The author of this article would like to consider three aspects, namely what, according to John, is "doing the will of God", what does John regard as "good" (specifically the use of ἀγαθός), and what is "sin".

---

3 See also Morris (1986) and Weiser (1993). Anderson (1996) focuses on Christology, but does not treat ethics. In his book on New Testament ethics, Scott (1934) makes only three references to John that are general and without any real discussion.

## 2. To do the works of God ...

A major clue as to the essence of ethical actions in John is given in John 6 in Jesus' discussion with the crowd Jesus fed (John 6). After the multiplication of the bread, the crowd approached Jesus as Rabbi (John 6:25) with an *ethical* question (John 6:28 – τί ποιῶμεν ἵνα ἐργαζώμεθα τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ) about the required behaviour to please God and receive eternal life. This is also the same question that the rich young man asks in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark. 10:17 *par.*) when he wants to know the way to eternal life.<sup>4</sup> The answer in the synoptics focuses on the requirements of the law. In John's Gospel the focus shifts from the law to the person of Jesus as his subsequent reaction indicates (John 6:29 – τοῦτό ἐστὶν τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα πιστεύητε εἰς ὃν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος). The essential deed that is required is faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is, therefore, the first and most crucial action required to do the works of God. Without this deed of fully associating with Jesus (Van der Watt, 2005:119-122), persons will remain in moral darkness and die in their sin (John 3:17 ff.; 8:21, 24). Let us explore this remark of Jesus a bit further.

In John 6:28 τί ποιεῖν is used in an absolute way, inquiring about the nature and direction of behaviour or actions, a phrase common to the New Testament (Matt. 6:3; Mark. 2:24; 10:17). As such the question is neutral, but it is directly qualified by the ἵνα clause, describing the aim or goal of the actions or behaviour. What should the nature of their actions be in order to qualify them as "being done as works of/for God" (Schnackenburg, 1980:39)? This is an ethical question in its purest form.<sup>5</sup>

---

4 Jesus answers the question of the rich man in Mark. 10:17 (τί ποιήσω ἵνα ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω) by referring to the commandments. The words in Luke and Mark largely corresponds; see Luke 18:18 – Τί ποιήσας ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω. Matthew 19:16 phrases it differently: τί ἀγαθὸν ποιήσω ἵνα σχῶ ζωὴν αἰώνιον. This way of putting it highlights the ethical essence of this question even more. The basic action(s) that will lead to eternity is sought. This is indeed the heart and essence of all ethical actions that will determine any consequent behaviour.

5 Keener (2003:677) correctly remarks that "works were central in Jewish ethics". (Schnackenburg, 1980:39; Brown, 1971:264-265; Barrett, 1978:287, Schenke, 1998:131; Morris, 1995:319). Haenchen (1980:320) thinks that the idea of *Werkreligion* plays a role here. Care should, however, be taken not to assume that there was a strong division between faith and works in the Jewish tradition (cf. Keener, 2003:677). In John faith deals specifically with an attitude towards Jesus and is not faith in general. Judging from the zeal of the Jewish opponents in John (even killing Jesus and his disciples for the sake of the honour of God

The phrase to “perform/work<sup>6</sup> the works of God”<sup>7</sup> (ἐργαζώμεθα τὰ ἔργα<sup>8</sup> τοῦ θεοῦ)<sup>9</sup> introduces a key concept in the following discussion and therefore needs closer attention. This phrase is found elsewhere in the LXX (for instance Hab. 1:5), Jewish literature (1 QS, 4:4; 1 QH, 5:36; Damascus Rule, 1:1; 2:14; 13:7) as well as the New Testament (Matt. 6:3; Mark. 2:24; 10:17).<sup>10</sup> The most common use of this phrase is to refer to God who does certain things (God’s actions – i.e. a subjective genitive; for an example in the Gospel itself see John 9:3). In John 6:28 it is better understood as an *objective genitive* emphasising the works people will do *for God*, or paraphrased, *to please God* or *because God requires it*. It refers to their moral effort to act according to God’s will.<sup>11</sup>

What did they have in mind when asking their question? Although views on the reference and meaning of τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ vary, there is strong support for the view that the crowd had their traditional

---

as they perceived it – cf. John 5:17 ff. and also 16:2) they must have believed in God. In John it is, however, about the correct faith, which is also the reason why faith is so often qualified in terms of Jesus in this Gospel.

- 6 There is a sensitivity among commentators that “working” should not be understood as “human endeavor”, but rather in the sense of “striving after or working toward” (Brown, 1971:261; Schnackenburg, 1980:39). Jesus’ answer that working has to do with faith contextually determines the meaning and nature of the doing.
- 7 See Brown (1971:264-265), Schnackenburg (1980:39), Wilckens (1998:100), Whitacre (1999:153-154) and Smith (1999:152).
- 8 Köstenberger (2004:207) notes that the repetition of the stem ἐργ- in the phrase ἐργαζώμεθα τὰ ἔργα could be seen as a Semitism. He refers to Matthew 26:10 par. (ἔργον γὰρ καλὸν ἡργάσατο), John 9:4 (ἡμᾶς δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα), Acts 13:41 (ἔργον ἐργάζομαι ἐγώ) – quotation of Habakkuk 1:5 (ἔργον ἐγὼ ἐργάζομαι – LXX) – and 1 Corinthians 16:10 (τὸ γὰρ ἔργον κυρίου ἐργάζεται).
- 9 Keener (2003:677) notes another parallel: “Cf. Ex 18:20, where the people’s ‘work’ is parallel to the statutes and laws and halakah”. See also Revelation 2:26 and John 14:12. In Numbers 8:11 we find the following remark that seems to be parallel to John 6:28-29: ὥστε ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα κυρίου. The context, however, differs significantly from that of John 6:28-29 so that this use provides little help in interpreting John 6.
- 10 In John 9:3 the term τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ is used in the sense of “works God do” (subjective genitive). See Schnackenburg (1980:39) who refers to John 9:3 and some Jewish scriptures like 1 QS, 4:4; 1 QH, 5:36; Damascus Rule, 1:1; 2:14; 13:7 and also Köstenberger (2004:208) and Keener (2003:678).
- 11 Haenchen (1980:320) speaks of “die von Gott gewollten Werken”.

obedience to the law in mind. These were Jews in a Jewish context (they were expecting the Messiah king – John 6:15 and such questions are found elsewhere in the New Testament in relation to the law – Mark. 10:17 ff. *par.*) and a question about the “im Gezeetz festgelegten Gotteswillens”, referring to the requirements of the Torah (Schenke, 1998:131), would be natural and expected. Keener (2003:678) motivates the ethical interpretation of works in John 6:28 by referring to similar ethical references in Jewish literature (i.e. Baruch, 2:9-10; CD, 2:14-15 as well as some other ethical uses in John 3:19-21; 7:7; 8:39, 41. Cf. also Rev. 2:26; 12:17; Köstenberger, 2004:208; Haenchen, 1980:320; Schenke, 1998: 131.)

In his answer to the question of the crowd, Jesus redirects the understanding of the crowd. First, He changes the plural (τὰ ἔργα) to an emphatic singular (τὸ ἔργον): τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ (Schnackenburg, 1980:39). This shifts the focus from several required deeds to a single action, signalling a movement away from rules (several ethical requirements) to a single action. The phrase “work of God” is then qualified by a ἵνα phrase: *believe*<sup>12</sup> (πιστεύετε – the verb<sup>13</sup> implies action; cf. also Keener, 2003:677) in him whom God has sent (ἵνα πιστεύετε εἰς ὃν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος). Believing in Jesus thus becomes the basic ethical requirement – i.e. imperative – that should characterise the actions of the crowd.<sup>14</sup> This is how you do the work of God.

This leads us to our next question: how could *faith* be regarded as a work of God? Faith (the verb πιστεύω, with its 98 occurrences in John’s Gospel) is not defined in a single verse in this Gospel, but the full extent of what is meant is gradually developed throughout the Gospel. Different contexts should be read in relation to each other in

12 Brown (1971:265) mentions that here we have the Johannine solution to the well-known debate about the relation between works and faith especially in James and Paul. See also Schnackenburg (1980:39); Smith (1999:152).

13 John consistently uses the verb referring to faith. For him it indeed involves an action.

14 Schnackenburg (1980:39) correctly notes: “All zeal for the law is useless if the Jews do not recognize in Jesus the one who is greater than Moses ... who brings, in the place of the Torah, grace and truth”. This shifts the focus from prescribed laws to experiencing a person in grace and truth. Keener (2003:678) remarks that ethics and soteriology overlaps here. Doing the right thing will lead to salvation. This is what ethics is all about. “Their question, ‘What shall we do ...?’ (6:28), might function as a sort of early Christian shorthand for ‘How shall we be saved?’”

order to achieve a full indication of what is intended; this cannot be developed in any detail here.<sup>15</sup> An analysis of the uses of πιστεύω shows that salvific faith involves full acceptance of the message of Jesus as well as his person, which includes his identity and his origin from God as Agent. Salvific faith in the Gospel of John is therefore a self-sacrificing, intellectual, and existential acceptance of the message and person of Jesus to the extent that it completely transforms a person's thoughts and deeds in accordance with this message and leads to an obedient life of doing what a child of God should do (Van der Watt, 2005:119-122). That is why Blank (1964: 129) is correct in describing salvific faith as "eine totale, das gesamte menschliche Sein ergreifende und bestimmende Grundhaltung".

An important remark remains to be made. It should also be noted that faith *is* not salvation – it is the *means of attaining* salvation. It refers to the action of a person opening him-/herself up in total and obedient acceptance of Jesus, the source of salvation, the Giver of eternal life. This is the reason faith could be linked to "works". Faith requires an "action" from the human in responding to the invitation of Jesus – it is a matter of opening up to Jesus and his revelation and to accept him and it in full. Brown (1971:265) remarks that John's view on the relation between faith and works shows that salvation is "not a question of works, as if faith did not matter; nor is it a question of faith without works. Rather, having faith is a work; indeed, it is the all important work of God."<sup>16</sup>

John also emphasises the above line of thinking in his treatment of a central ethical concept in ancient times, namely, what is really and truly good. This was an essential question asked by the philosophers, and not only them – the term ἀγαθός is used over 600 times in the Old Testament. Let's now turn our attention to that.

---

15 The word is indeed used in a variety of ways, for instance, to accept (John 3:12), to believe in a person or in his name (Jesus – usually with εἰς or ἐν; also God – John 5:24), to believe in objects like words or Scripture, not to entrust yourself (John 2:24), simply to believe (because of somebody's word or signs).

16 See also Schenke (1998:131): "Gott gemäße Werke nur wirken kann, wer das eine und einzige Werk Gottes vollzogen hat, an seinen Gesandten zu glauben". Keener (2003:677) points out that "rather than laboring for actual food ... they should work for what the Son of Man would 'give' them – the familiar sense of 'giving' providing an image disjunctive with the familiar sense of 'work'". Although faith "opens a person up towards Jesus", it sets a process in motion where the gifts of God through Jesus can be fully received.

### 3. What is truly good?

The use of *the good* (ἀγαθός) is a central point of discussion in philosophical debates since Socrates.<sup>17</sup> There the good was usually seen not as an action, but as something to strive for,<sup>18</sup> for its own sake or for the sake of what is useful (Höffe, 1992:110). It could, however, also motivate actions or indicate the outcome of an action or qualitatively determine an action.<sup>19</sup> John also knew and used the term ἀγαθός, though very sparingly – it is used only in the following verses: John 1:46; 5:29; 7:12; 3 John 11. A question that beckons, in the light of the centrality of the term in philosophical discussions, is what role this term played in John.

In John's Gospel ἀγαθός is mainly used with two different focal points, which may also overlap, namely, in the sense of what a person qualitatively does (quality of deeds) and what a person qualitatively is (quality of a person on the basis of what he does or is). Consider the following two examples.

In John 5:28-29 the contrasting pair οἱ τὰ ἀγαθὰ ποιήσαντες versus οἱ δὲ τὰ φανῶλα πράξαντες refers in a generic way to the quality<sup>20</sup> or nature of actions, either good or bad,<sup>21</sup> on the basis of which the

---

17 *The good* is one of the central concepts in metaphysics and practical philosophy (cf. Höffe, 1992:109). It is, however, used in many different ways and a single definition eludes description.

18 See for instance, Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.4 – more or less the same period the Gospels were written):

He who is making progress, having learned from philosophers that desire means the desire of good things (ἀγαθός), and aversion means aversion from bad things (κακός); having learned too that happiness and tranquility are not attainable by man otherwise than by not failing to obtain what he desires, and not falling into that which he would avoid.

19 The Stoics, for instance, narrowed down the meaning of “the good”. Forschner (1995:171) remarks: “Die Grundsatz ... lautet: μόνον τὸ καλὸν ἀγαθόν, nur das sittlich Gute ist gut”. Earlier philosophers did not automatically link the good to morals, although there were some efforts in doing that (Forschner, 1995:172). For them the term still covered a wider semantic range. The Stoics, however, by linking καλόν and ἀγαθόν drew the good into the ethical (political) sphere as *Strebenszielen* (Forschner, 1995:172) that would result in happiness.

20 ἀγαθός is defined by Arndt *et al.* (2000:3) in terms of quality as well as a high standard of worth and merit.

21 Arndt *et al.* (2000:501) define the term κακός as “being of low grade or morally substandard” or “being relatively inferior in quality”.



eschatological judgement will take place (Van der Watt, 1985:71-86). Doing good because you *are* good serves as the basis for judgement. A type of anthropology is presupposed where the quality of a person determines the quality of his/her deeds and the quality of the person's deeds illustrate the quality of that person. You do what you are and you are what you do, so to speak.

In John 7:12 the focus shifts to the quality of character. The scene takes us to the Jewish crowd discussing the quality of Jesus at the feast. Some said He is good (ἀγαθός ἐστιν), while others were of the opinion that He is not good, but that He misleads people (οὐ, ἀλλὰ πλανᾷ τὸν ὄχλον – see also John 7:47). A general qualitative judgement on Jesus' character is made, based on what He does, as becomes clear from the negative reaction of some to his deeds – He *leads* people astray.

Again, deeds confirm identity and identity determines deeds (cf. also John 13:34-35, or the discussion about the identity of Jesus in John 9). No tension exists. This anthropology was typical of Socrates' views too, although the fact that a good person may do bad things was reflected on by later philosophers like Aristotle and others. This is also consistent with what we have seen in our discussion of John 6:25 ff.

The way in which the quality of the good and the bad is determined, i.e. how it is decided what is good or bad, should also be noted. Judgement is the prerogative of the Father and his Son (John 5:22, 27); they determine what is acceptable (good) and what not. The good (τὰ ἀγαθὰ) on which judgement is based, is defined in terms of the will of the Father and his Son (John 5:27). There is, therefore, a way to know the "good" – by knowing the will of the Father and the Son. This is in contrast to the philosophers' efforts to define what good is – even though many of them acknowledged the existence of an objective good, opinions differed as to how the good could be obtained. Options like the shared community's view, participation and discovery through reason, what causes happiness or pleasure, et cetera, were offered as ways to determine the content of the good they strove for. In John's case the good is found in a Person (God); He is the judge whose will is paramount.

It is John's use of ἀγαθός in John 5:29, however, that catches the eye, especially in the light of the following parallel:

5:29 <sup>22</sup>	ἀγαθὰ ποιήσαντες εἰς ... <sup>23</sup>	οἱ δὲ τὰ φαῦλα πράξαντες εἰς ...
3:20-21	ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ...	ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων ... <sup>24</sup>

These two sets of phrases occur in semantically equivalent contexts dealing with moral issues that run terminologically and semantically parallel.<sup>25</sup> The one exception is the noun ἀλήθεια that substitutes ἀγαθός as a conceptual contrast to φαῦλα. “Truth” is thus contextually used within the same semantic field and context as “good”. The parallelism with the switch in terminology suggests that these two words refer to equivalent realities.

This brings us to an important point regarding the relation between ἀλήθεια (the truth) and ἀγαθός (the good). The frequency of the use of ἀγαθός is low in the Gospel (three times), while the frequency of ἀλήθεια and related words is high – it is a term John favours. Truth is indeed linked to all the important characters in the Gospel and is also a key concept in the letters of John. Although John knows the term ἀγαθός he consciously prefers to express himself in terms of *truth*, but reminds us of the conceptual relation between the good and the truth. He indeed chooses not to use the well-known ancient moral term ἀγαθός, but prefers to express himself through the conceptual world covered by the concept of “truth”. “Doing the truth”

---

22 Although some scholars like Bultmann thought that John 5:28-29 might be a later addition, these verses form an integral part of the Gospel (cf. Van der Watt, 1985:71-86).

23 The combination of both ἀγαθόν and ἀλήθεια with a verb of action (ποιῶν) should be noted. Generally speaking, ἀγαθόν in Greek philosophy tends to be something you strive for and not what you do, while ἀλήθεια refers more to what really is or an accurate perspective on reality (cf. Köstenberger, 2005:34). In most cases in Greek philosophy it would not be said that you “do” good or the truth. This prompted scholars to look elsewhere for the origin of this expression. Ibuki (1972:336), following De la Potterie, Haas *et al.* (1994:26), as well as Harris (1994:68) argue that this is a Hebraism, since the reference of truth in Hebrew could be used with a verb of action.

24 Newman and Nida (1980:92) note that this is also a Semitism like its corresponding phrase in John 5:29.

25 See, for instance the correspondence in John of the following themes: judgement (3:17, 18-5:24, 27); faith (3:18-5:24); mission of Jesus (3:16, 17); eternal life (3:16-5:24); Son of God (3:18-5:25); obedience (3:21-5:25); good behaviour (3:21-5:28) and bad behaviour (3:19, 20-5:28).

in John 3:21 is directly linked to works done *in God*<sup>26</sup> (τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστὶν εἰργασμένα; cf. also 1 John 1:6; Smalley, 1978:20-21). This is an echo of the remark in 3 John 11 that the person who does *good* (τὸ ἀγαθόν/ἀγαθοποιῶν) is of (ἐκ) God – again semantically compatible uses that confirm semantic overlap. No wonder Schnackenburg (1968:407) interprets doing the *truth* as a “morally *good* action done according to God’s will”.

There is, however, more. Truth is not only branded as a moral term by linking it to ἀγαθός, but in the Prologue (John 1:17) it is contrasted to the law as an expression of God’s moral will (cf. Beasley-Murray, 1999:17). The law was given through Moses, but in contrast grace and *truth*<sup>27</sup> came through Jesus (ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο).<sup>28</sup> Grace and truth is presented in a superior light<sup>29</sup> compared to the law, without degrading or eliminating the law.<sup>30</sup> The law remains intact as part of Scripture that witnesses to Jesus (John 5:39, 46; cf. also 9:28-33; Ibuki, 1972:203-204). There is no inherent conflict between truth and law, since the law is true and reflects the truth if it is interpreted correctly (cf. John 5:39-40; 7:14-24). “Doing the truth” is indeed doing the works *in God*, as it is stated in John 3:21 (τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστὶν εἰργασμένα – cf. also 1 John 1:6; 3 John 11). Ibuki (1972: 205) argues that the contrast in John 1:17 is therefore between the law and an intimate relation with Jesus. Lindsay (1993:132-133)

---

26 See Ibuki (1972:340 ff.) for a detailed discussion of these verses. Newman and Nida (1980:94) note that the works done “in God” should not be interpreted spatially, but relationally.

27 Beasley-Murray (1999:14) remarks: “ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια, ‘grace and truth’, = the common *חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת*, frequently rendered in the LXX by ἔλεος καὶ ἀλήθεια to describe the covenant mercy of God (cf. Exod. 34:6)”. Lindsay (1993:131-133) emphasises the thematic link between Exodus 33-34 and John 1:14-18, which strengthens the argument that John 1:17 echoes Exodus 34:6 (Kuyper, 1964:3 ff.; Köstenberger, 2004:43). This is against Bultmann’s view which denies such a direct connection.

28 Law and what is good is also indirectly related in John 1:45-46, although in another way. The law witnesses to what is good (Theobald, 1988:360-361).

29 Lindsay (1993:133) refers to the close connection between law and doing the truth. Ibuki (1972:204-205) builds a case that the main emphasis in John 1:17 falls on “truth” and not on the other words.

30 Lindsay (1993:134) is of opinion that truth and Torah stand in contrast and need qualification.

underlines the faithful fellowship of God with humankind, based on the use of grace and truth in Exodus 34:6. A continuous bond of faithful fellowship is implied. There is a shift from the juridical (law) to personal relations as the ethical basis for argumentation. The point is that both moral concepts, the good (value) as well as the law (juridical), are semantically connected or even “absorbed” in the concept *truth*, though in different ways. The significance for us is that the truth that Jesus brings, becomes an important norm for identifying, measuring and judging moral action. The good and even the requirements of the law should be interpreted in the light of the truth. It is therefore crucial to understand John’s semantics when using the word *truth* and how this relates to ethics.

The term *truth* is used in diverse ways and contexts in this Gospel.<sup>31</sup> The Father, Son and Spirit are all characterised by truth. Truth is what belongs to, or could be associated with God (Köstenberger, 2005:34), whether it is knowledge, persons (in a personified way), qualities, or actions (Beasley-Murray, 2000:17). Truth belongs to God, is determined and defined by God (cf. Barrett, 1978:167; Harris, 1994:69), and functions where God is present.<sup>32</sup> Truth is likewise intimately related to Jesus who is called the truth (Koester, 2005:117-133; Lindsay, 1993:140), and the Spirit, who is called the Spirit of truth.<sup>33</sup> There is indeed a close interrelation between truth and the respective functional relationships between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. God, the Father, is true. Jesus, also being true, witnesses to this truth through his revelation. Ibuki (1972:115) therefore argues that truth is directly related to the unity of the Father and the Son (Köstenberger, 2004:32). The Spirit of truth in turn leads the believers in this truth that Jesus is and has revealed. In this way the Father, Son and Spirit forms a coordinated and functional whole in

---

31 For an overview of the history of research in the larger part of the previous century, see Ibuki (1972:1-27), Schnackenburg (1980:225-226) and Burridge (2007:286).

32 Kuyper (1964:15) treats the difference between the Hebrew and Greek uses, and he notes that *truth* in the Greek sense, applied to God, would emphasise the trueness of God against false gods. In Hebrew the emphasis would be on the faithfulness and reliability of God. Compared to the Greek use that is more abstract, the Hebrew use focuses on the relational aspect expressed by faithfulness. Köstenberger (2005:34) maintains that this notion of God’s faithfulness could and indeed was revealed throughout the history of Israel with the culmination in Christ.

33 See Brown (1972:1140; also p. 273 for a detailed discussion of the Spirit and truth) and Lee (2004:280).

the Gospel – each with his own function in establishing truth in this world. Truth seems to cover everything that belongs to God, functioning as a sort of “symbolic term”, covering what could be included under “divine or divinely related”.

Exactly this overarching symbolic use of the concept of *truth* in the Gospel makes it a perfect fit for John's view of ethics. The concept of *truth* is related to believers in various ways and covers a wide spectrum of who believers are and what they are supposed to do. Believers who listen to the voice of Jesus are said to be of/out of the truth (John 18:37 – πᾶς ὁ ὢν ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας) and know the truth, since Jesus is the truth and brings the truth, based on his relation to the true and faithful God. This truth, presented in and through Christ, sets believers free (John 8:32 – καὶ γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς) and sanctifies them so that they can inter alia do the truth (John 3:20-21 – see also 1 John 1:6) and participate in the mission of Jesus in this world (John 17:17-18 – ἀγιάσον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθειά ἐστιν). Because of this truth, believers are not only saved (set free to be children of God – John 8:32), but are also equipped (sanctified) for what lies ahead. The words (revelation) of Jesus (John 8:31) that are the truth, lead them to faith in Jesus, the truth, resulting in them becoming part of the family of God (be in truth), living according to the will of the true God, which is the truth. The truth is revealed to and could be among and even be part of people. If they seek truth, which consists of knowledge of and a relationship with the divine, they can find it in Jesus, through faith. By simply looking at this rich variety of expressions that link believers to the truth, the all-encompassing significance of truth becomes more than evident. Jesus brings the truth and the believers accept the truth, are determined by the truth, and live according to the truth. For our purposes, one could say that their ethical program is mapped by truth. Their belief in Jesus and relation to the Spirit exposes them to the truth and makes them part of what is generically identified by the word *truth*. Functionally truth seems to qualify the totality of what the believer is and should be when he/she becomes part of God's people through faith and birth of God (John 1:12-13).

The descriptions above cover the total span of the lives of believers, from their origin, their identity, to guiding their deeds. Truth semantically functions as a qualitative spatial (in the sense of “a fictive space created through relations” that is typical of group orientated societies) designation, originating from and qualified by the Father, revealed by the Son and witnessed to by the Spirit, within which

believers are introduced through faith in Jesus. Who believers are and what they do happens “in the truth and in truth”. This is just another, and indeed a symbolic way, of saying that a person is totally determined by God.

It is common in ethical discussions to distinguish between teleological and the deontological ethics. Broadly speaking, the deontological focuses on what is right (in juridical sense), and the teleological on the value aspects (i.e. the outcome of an action or what is good) of actions. *Good* as concept is usually more related to the value aspect, while *law* is linked to the juridical aspect. The term *truth* semantically combines both areas, determining both what is “good” and what is “right”. It is right and it is good, because it is “truly divine”. The term *truth* covers a wider semantic range than either “the good” or “the law”. Truth is also personified in John – it is not abstractly defined or restricted to laws, but linked to Person(s). This gives the ethics of John a different character: it is relational ethics. In exploring the ethics of John further it should be asked exactly what this means.

#### 4. What is sin?

The idea that the starting point of thought about ethics in John is located in faith in Jesus as the major ethical deed, backed up by the remarks that one should do the truth, referring to living in the truth as representation of the presence of God, is substantiated by the way sin, as a contrasting reality, is presented in this Gospel. The essence of sin focuses on the unwillingness of people to accept and believe in Jesus (John 16:9) – it is the opposite of faith, implying that they do not do the works of God.<sup>34</sup> Meeks (1993:15) is correct in remarking the following:

Every map of a moral world depends heavily for its delineation upon the dark colors that are used to sketch in the enemies of virtue. What are the things that stand against our being good?

The essence of sin in the Gospel is not necessarily doing wrong things, but doing *the* wrong thing, that is, not accepting Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (John 16:9 – see Hasitschka, 1989 for a de-

---

34 See Metzner (2000) for a detailed treatment of this issue (cf. also Hasitschka, 1989; Alison, 1997:83-102). For occurrences of the word ἁμαρτία, see John 1:29; 8:21, 24, 34, 46; 9:34, 41; 15:22, 24; 16:8, 9; 19:11; 20:23; 1 John 1:7, 8, 9; 2:2, 12; 3:4, 5, 8, 9; 4:10; 5:16-17.

tailed discussion). Not believing in Him excludes a person from everything Jesus has to offer such as eternal life, membership in the family, real love, truth, light, et cetera. In John 6:29 Jesus tells the crowd: "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent". Not accepting Jesus, implies that you side with his opponent, the devil (John 8:42-47) and that is the major sin. It implies that such a person is spiritually dead.

One should not confuse the symptoms with the real problem. The real issue is the refusal to accept Christ, which results in evil behaviour that becomes physically visible in hate, murder (John 3:20; 8:44; 15:18 ff.) and lies (John 8:44), theft (John 12:6), or seeking self-honour (John 5:44; 15:19) and loving this world and not God (1 John 2:15-17; see also John 3:19-20; 5:42). Such deeds are only symptomatic of the state of the sinful existence of a person. When believing in Jesus cures this "disease" the symptoms will be treated automatically – that person will pass from death to life, from lies to truth (John 5:24) and that will become apparent in his deeds.

## **5. Positioning within the structural framework of action formation**

What are the implications of this Johannine view on ethics? The ethical system of John proved to be primarily *relational*, grounded in Christology. Salvific faith, as the base ethical requirement, points to the establishment of a relation between Jesus and a particular person. This relation is based on a self-sacrificing, intellectual, and existential acceptance of the message and person of Jesus to the extent that it completely transforms the person's thoughts and deeds in accordance with this message and leads to an obedient life of doing what a child of God should do. Through faith, believers receive a new identity – they now live in truth, in other words, in the overall presence of the divine. This relation determines believers' lives and actions, and the ethical views in John are consequently worked out according to these basic points of departure. Ethics in John functions within the context of a new identity which determines the rules (ethics) for proper behaviour. Ethical actions are therefore expressions of a person's ethical identity, which is in turn determined by the person's relationship with his (F)father (and his Son). Actions cannot be separated from identity and the one flows naturally into the other, so much so that accepting Jesus in faith becomes the primary ethical action in John. Faith leads to a life encompassing change that determines all facets of a person's present and future life.

This means that one cannot only focus on the exhortatory sections of specific sections dealing with moral actions, but analysing the ethics of John implies that one must also consider the formation and identity description of the Johannine group. This perspective changes the analytical categories that should be used in describing the ethics of John. Restricted categories like virtue and vice lists, or house tables, et cetera, are no longer the only analytical categories, but ethical dynamics starts with the change in identity caused by faith in Jesus. Ethical analysis in John should start from this point.

### List of references

- ALISON, J. 1997. The man blind from birth and the subversions of sin. *Theology and sexuality*, (7):83-102.
- ANDERSON, P.N. 1996. The Christology of the fourth Gospel. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- ARNDT, W., DANKER, F.W. & BAUER, W. 2000. A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature [BDAG]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- AUGENSTEIN, J. 1993. Das Liebesgebot im Johannesevangelium und in den Johannesbriefen. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- BARRETT, C.K. 1978. The Gospel according to St. John. London: SPCK.
- BEASLEY-MURRAY, G.R. 1999. John. Rev. ed. Dallas: Word Books.
- BERGER, K. 1994. Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums: Theologie des Neuen Testaments. Tübingen: Francke.
- BERGER, K. 1997. Im Anfang war Johannes: Datierung und Theologie des vierten Evangeliums. Stuttgart: Quell.
- BLANK, J. 1964. Krisis: Untersuchungen zur johanneischen Christologie und Eschatologie. Freiburg: Lambertus.
- BROWN, R.E. 1971. The Gospel according to John. Vol. 1. London: Chapman.
- BROWN, R.E. 1972. The Gospel according to John. Vol. 2. London: Chapman.
- BURRIDGE, R. 2007. Imitating Jesus: an inclusive approach to New Testament ethics. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- DUNN, J.D.G. 2009. Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the making. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- FORSCHNER, M. 1995. Die stoische Ethik. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- HAAS, C., DE JONGE, M. & SWELLENGREBEL, J.L. 1994. A handbook on the letters of John. New York: United Bible Society.
- HAENCHEN, E. 1980. Johannesevangelium: ein Kommentar. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- HARRIS, E. 1994. Prologue and gospel: the theology of the fourth evangelist. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press.
- HASITSCHKA, M. 1989. Befreiung von Sünde nach dem Johannesevangelium. Tyrolia: Innsbruck.
- HÖFFE, O. 1992. Lexikon der Ethik. München: Beck.
- HÜBNER, H. 1995. Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments. Band 3. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- IBUKI, Y. 1972. Die Wahrheit im Johannesevangelium. Bonn: Hanstein.



- KEENER, C.S. 2003. *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 1 & 2. Peabody: Hendrikson.
- KOESTER, C. 2005. Jesus as the way to the Father in johannine theology (John 14:6). (In Van Belle, G., Van der Watt, J.G. & Maritz, P., eds. *Theology and Christology in the fourth Gospel*. Peters: Leuven. p. 117-133.)
- KÖSTENBERGER, A.J. 2004. *John*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- KÖSTENBERGER, A.J. 2005. "What is truth?" Pilates question in its johannine and larger biblical context. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 48(1):33-62.
- KUYPER, L.J. 1964. Grace and truth: an Old Testament description of God, and its use in the johannine Gospel. *Interpretation*, 18(1):3-19.
- LEE, D. 2004. In the spirit of truth: worship and prayer in the Gospel of John and the early fathers. *Vigiliae Christianae*, 58(3):277-297.
- LINDSAY, D.R. 1993. What is truth? *Alhqeia* in the Gospel of John. *RQ*, 35(3):129-145.
- LOADER, W.R.G. 2002. *Jesus' attitude towards the law: a study of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- MATERA, F. 1996. *New Testament ethics: the legacies of Jesus and Paul*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- MEEKS, W.A. 1986a. *The moral world of the first Christians*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- MEEKS, W.A. 1986b. Understanding early Christian ethics. *Journal of biblical literature*, (105):3-11.
- MEEKS, W.A. 1993. *The origins of Christian morality: the first two centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- MEEKS, W.A. 1996. The ethics of the fourth evangelist. (In Culpepper, R.A. & Black, C.C., eds. *Exploring the Gospel of John*. In honor of D. Moody Smith. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. p. 317-326.)
- METZNER, R. 2000. *Das Verständnis der Sünde im Johannesevangelium*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- MORRIS, L. 1986. *New Testament theology*. Grand Rapids: Academic Books.
- MORRIS, L. 1995. *The Gospel according to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- NEWMAN, B.M. & NIDA, E.A. 1980. *A translator's handbook on the Gospel of John*. New York: United Bible Society.
- POPKES, E.E. 2005. *Die Theologie der Liebe Gottes in den johanneischen Schriften: Studien zur Semantik der Liebe und zum Motivkreis des Dualismus*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- SCHENKE, L. 1998. *Johannes: Kommentar*. Düsseldorf: Patmos.
- SCHNACKENBURG, R. 1968. *The Gospel according to St. John*. Vol. 1. New York: Herder & Herder.
- SCHNACKENBURG, R. 1980. *The Gospel according to St. John*. Vol. 2. London: Seabury.
- SCHRAGE, W. 1996. *The ethics of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: Clark.
- SCOTT, C.A.A. 1934. *New Testament ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SMALLEY, S.S. 1978. *John, evangelist and interpreter*. Paternoster: Exeter.
- SMITH, D.M. 1999. *John*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- THEOBALD, M. 1988. *Die Fleischwerdung des Logos*. Aschendorff: Münster.
- THEOBALD, M. 2002. *Herrenworte im Johannesevangelium*. Freiburg: Herder.

- VAN DER WATT, J.G. 1985. A new look at John 5:25-29 in the light of the use of the term "eternal life" in the Gospel according to John. *Neotestamentica*, (19):71-86.
- VAN DER WATT, J.G. 2005. Salvation in the Gospel according to John. (*In* Van der Watt, G., ed. *Salvation in the New Testament. Perspectives on soteriology*. Leiden: Brill. p. 101-131.)
- WEISER, A. 1993. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Tl. 2. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- WENDLAND, H-D. 1975. *Ethik des Neuen Testaments*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- WHITACRE, R.A. 1999. *John*. Leicester: InterVarsity.
- WILCKENS, U. 1998. *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

**Key concepts:**

John, deeds of God in  
John, ethics of  
John, the good in  
John, truth in

**Kernbegrippe:**

Johannes, die goeie in  
Johannes, die werke van God in  
Johannes, etiek in  
Johannes, waarheid in

